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Redemptive Leadership

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**Salting the Workplace – How?
Seminar at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
Saturday, April 16, 2011**

“Redemptive Leadership”

C. William Pollard

I have looked forward to this time together and the opportunity to share some thoughts about leadership. The title of my talk is Redemptive Leadership. Leadership that reflects the transforming power of being delivered from a focus on self and the trappings of title and position to instead a focus for the care of the people who follow and an acceptance of the responsibility for their growth and development.

Now the context for my remarks on this subject reflects, for the most part, my experience in business and the marketplace. The principles, however, are equally applicable to the leadership of any organizational effort that involves people.

President Obama, in describing his reason for the collapse of our financial markets and meltdown of our economy, suggested that “we had arrived at this result because of an era of profound irresponsible leadership that engulfed both private business firms and public institutions, including some of our largest corporations and the seats of power in Washington D.C.”

If he is accurate in his conclusion, what does responsible leadership look like? How do we implement it? Does responsible leadership also involve moral leadership? Does it involve a better understanding and application of Redemptive Leadership?

During my leadership years at ServiceMaster, Peter Drucker became a valued advisor, mentor, and friend. The lessons learned were many. He had a profound influence on the growth and development of our Company, especially during those

rapid growth years when we were doubling in size every 3 to 3 ½ years and extending the scope of our services to include a global footprint.

If Drucker were here today, he would start our conversation on responsible leadership with the reminder that a leader has only one choice to make: “to lead or to mislead”.

He would then point out what leadership is not. It’s not about “leadership qualities” or “charisma.” It’s not about title or position. It is not in and of itself good or desirable. And then he would say that leadership is just a means – to what end is the crucial question – and Drucker would then remind us that the end of leadership involves: the people who follow, the direction they are headed, their growth and development, and the importance of achieving a beneficial result from their combined effort.

Drucker also would say that leadership should recognize that the management of people is not just the science of organizational structures, processes, and procedures, but it is also a liberal art. He would suggest that as we lead and manage people, we need to understand the nature of the human condition and recognize that our humanity cannot be defined solely by its physical or rational nature, but also has a spiritual dimension.

On questions of faith and the nature of our humanity, Drucker was profoundly influenced by the writings of Kierkegaard. For Drucker, faith brought meaning and purpose to life. In his essay entitled “The Unfashionable Kierkegaard”, he quoted from Kierkegaard saying:

“Human existence is possible as existence not in despair, as existence not in tragedy, but is possible as existence in faith. Faith is the belief that in God the

impossible is possible, that in Him, time and eternity are one, that both life and death are meaningful. Faith is the knowledge that man is a creature – not autonomous, not the master, not the end, not the center – and yet responsible and free.”

Thus, Redemptive Leadership with a focus on the care and development of the people who follow cannot be divorced from questions of faith or the question of God.

As we sought to implement this type of leadership at ServiceMaster, we started with a mission statement that clearly reflected our purpose and intent.

Our corporate objectives were simply stated: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We didn't use that first objective as a basis for exclusion. It was, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different beliefs were all part of God's world.

It did not mean that everything was done right. As leaders, we experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong. But because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we could not hide our mistakes. Mistakes were regularly flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness, and leaders could not protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading.

The process of seeking understanding and application of these objectives at all levels of the organization was a never-ending task. While at times it was discouraging, it also was energizing as one realized the continuing potential for creativity, innovation, and growth as there was a focus on the development of the whole person. Allow me to share a story that is included in my book *The Soul of the Firm* to illustrate this point.

Several years ago, I was traveling in Russia. I had been asked to give several talks on the service business and our company objectives. While I was in the city now renamed St. Petersburg, I met Olga. She had the job of mopping the lobby floor in a large hotel, which at that time was occupied mostly by people from the West. I took an interest in her and her task. I engaged her in conversation through the help of an interpreter and noted the tools she had to do her work. Olga had been given a T-frame for a mop, and a bucket of dirty water to do her job. She really wasn't cleaning the floor. She was just moving dirt from one section to another. The reality of Olga's task was to do the least amount of motions in the greatest amount of time until the day was over. Olga was not proud of what she was doing. She had no dignity in her work. She was a long way from owning the result.

I knew from our brief conversation that there was a great unlocked potential in Olga. I am sure you could have eaten off the floor in her two-room apartment – but work was something different. No one had taken the time to teach or equip Olga. No one had taken the time to care about her as a person. She was lost in a system that did not care. Work was just a job that had to be done. She was the object of work, not the subject.

I contrast the time spent with Olga with an experience I had just a few days later while visiting a hospital we serve in London, England. As I was introduced to one of the housekeepers, Nisha, as the chairman of ServiceMaster, she put her arms around me, gave me a big hug, and thanked me for the training and tools she had received to do her job. She then showed me all that she had accomplished in cleaning patients' rooms, providing a detailed before –and–after ServiceMaster description. She was proud of her work. She had bought into the result because someone had cared enough to show her the way and recognize her when the task was done. She was looking forward to the next accomplishment, and she was thankful. You would have thought she owned the company.

What was the difference between these two people? Yes, one was born in Moscow and the other in New Delhi, and their race, language and nationalities were different, but their basic tasks were the same. They both had to work for a living. They both had modest and limited financial resources. One was very proud of what she was doing - not only cleaning a floor - she was part of a team helping sick people get well. Her work had affected her view of herself and others. The other was not proud of what she was doing, and she had a limited view of her potential and worth.

The difference had a lot to do with how they were treated and cared for in the work environment. In one case, the person was treated as the subject of work. The task was designed to provide dignity and value in what she did. In the other case, the person was treated as the object of work – a pair of hands to get a job done.

Yes, regardless of the task, people can find a sense of purpose and meaning in their work. They can develop a strong ethic that extends to the care for others; a sense of community and a willingness to give back and practice charity. Yes, they can develop a respect for the dignity and worth of their fellow workers and a willingness to serve others.

But for this to occur, there must be Leadership:

- that knows what they believe and why they believe it;
- that knows where they are headed and why it is important for people to follow;
- that seeks to understand who people are and why they work and not just what they do and how they do it;
- that is willing to serve and walk in the shoes of those they lead;
- that is willing to be an example in their private and public life of the reality of their faith and beliefs;
- that recognizes a continued need to focus on the care and development of the people being led.

These principles of Redemptive Leadership have their origin in the lessons that Jesus taught His disciples as He washed their feet – namely that no leader is greater or has a self-interest more important than those being led. For the message of the gospel to go forth - for His church to be established, His disciples would have to assume leadership roles. The time would come when they would no longer be called disciples, but instead, Apostles. They would be assuming positions of title and authority over others. But their leadership was only a means – their end focus must be on the people who would follow and accept Christ as their Savior and the direction they were headed.

The implementation of Redemptive Leadership has been a continuing learning experience for me. It has not come naturally. The first thing I had to understand was what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as I first joined the ServiceMaster senior management team and spent the first two months of my ServiceMaster career out cleaning floors and doing the maintenance and other work which was part of our service business. In so doing, I was beginning to understand what would be my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead.

Later on in my career, as I became CEO of the firm, the faces of our service workers would often flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights and the wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. When all the numbers and figures were added up and reported as the results of the firm, they had to do more than just follow the rules or satisfy the changing standards of the accounting profession. They also had to accurately reflect the reality of our combined performance – a result that was real – a result that you could depend upon. A result that would reflect the true value of the firm. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those that I was committed to serve.

Implicit in leadership is the power to make decisions that affect others. You can be right in your intent and decision but be wrong in how you use power to implement that decision. The mistakes I have made as a leader that hurt the most are those that have resulted in breached relationships with others. In seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have at times pressed too hard for results without understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk of failure that were influencing substandard performance of the individual involved. I have learned that people put in a corner must fight or crumble and the rightness of my position can be lost in the defeat of the person. In such times, there is a need for admitting your mistakes, asking for forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation.

Unfortunately, the trappings of hierarchy often come with a position of leadership – the perks or prestige of the office and the arrogance of success can tempt leaders to focus on self and think they have all the answers rather than focusing on their responsibility to others. It is the evil of hubris. It is often subtle and can have a cumulative effect on judgment unless it is nipped in the bud.

Let me share with you another story about a lesson I learned from Peter Drucker that occurred later on in my leadership responsibilities at ServiceMaster and reflects the continuing need to be aware of the subtle effect of hubris.

One of the benefits of my friendship with Peter is that he never hesitated to point out those areas where I could improve my leadership. One of those important moments of learning occurred when we were traveling together to conduct a management seminar in Tokyo for Japanese business leaders.

After the seminar, Peter and I had dinner. I shared with him my disappointment, and yes, even anger, over the fact that no one from the leadership team of our Japanese business partner had come to the seminar. They had been invited and had promised to attend. Since some of our current and prospective customers were in

attendance, it would have provided an opportunity for them to learn and also to make important business connections.

I explained to Peter that we had recently decided to delay bringing one of our new service lines to Japan and that our partner was upset with that decision. I explained that this was probably the reason its leaders did not come.

I told Peter that I intended to cancel my trip to their headquarters in Osaka and take an earlier flight back to the States. Peter encouraged me to rethink my position and gave some advice, including his thoughts and understanding of Japanese culture. Although I listened to him, I made up my mind that I was not going to accept his advice and I would reschedule my flight the next morning.

When dinner was over, we returned to our respective hotel rooms. At about 10:30 that evening, I received a call from Peter asking me if I would come to his room. He was still concerned about my reactions and wanted a further discussion with me.

As Peter opened the door to his hotel room, I could tell by the look on his face that he was troubled. He told me to sit on the chair near his bed. He then sat down on the edge of his bed and looked me straight in the eye. "Bill," he said, "you are suffering from hubris. It's time for you to eat some humble pie." He went on to explain how quickly leaders can lose touch with the reality of their responsibility when they think their pride is at risk. He pointed out that my job as leader was to go to Osaka, meet with our business partners, resolve our differences, and rebuild a relationship of trust. This result was needed for the continued growth of our business in Japan and for the opportunities it would provide the people in our business. It was my job to do this as a leader, and it was something that I could not delegate.

It was great advice. The next morning I was on the train to Osaka, and my meeting there accomplished the right result for our business and for our people. I did

have to eat some humble pie. The leadership lesson was clear. My leadership responsibility was not about me or my feelings. It was about what should be done for our business and our people.

(Give example of 6 months later – Komai funeral)

For the responsible leader, the subordination of self is always a work in progress with the measure of success coming in the development and changed lives of the people you lead. Redemptive Leadership is an awesome responsibility – a “posture of indebtedness” to the people you are leading. As Drucker would say there is only one choice to make – to lead or mislead.

Revised 3/24/10